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Episode 168: 48 Hours, Part 2

Air Date: July 2, 2021

Phoebe Judge: This episode picks up from our last episode, Episode 167. It's called "48 Hours". If you haven't listened to that one yet, you may want to go back and listen to them in order.

This episode contains descriptions of violence and sexual assault. Please use discretion.

In March of 2015, Denise Huskins and her boyfriend, Aaron Quinn were asleep in Vallejo, California when they were woken up around 3:00 AM by a strange man's voice. They were drugged. Their hands were tied by zip ties, and they were given blacked out swim goggles to wear. Denise Huskins was kidnapped. Aaron Quinn was positioned in front of a video camera and told he would be monitored at all times. He was told to wait for an instruction to go to the bank and withdraw money. If he called the police, he was

told his girlfriend, Denise Huskins, would be killed. But Aaron did call the police and agreed to go into the police station to provide information. He was questioned for many hours; and then, he was told that his account was, quote, "extraordinary", and that the police did not believe him.

Denise Huskins had been put into the trunk of a car driven hours away and held prisoner. Her kidnapper had raped her twice. After about 48 hours, Denise was released. Before she was let go, her kidnapper threatened her. He said he knew she would talk to the police but that there were two things she could not tell them: that he had served in the military, and that he had raped her. If she told police either of those two things, the man said his organization would come back for her and for her family. He said he'd be watching. She was told, "We know where your family lives." And then, she was let go, dropped off in her mother's neighborhood in Huntington Beach near Los Angeles. It was March 25th, 2015.

Denise spoke with Huntington Beach police officers. They asked if she needed medical attention. But then an officer asked Denise, quote, "Did you ever ask him to let you go?" She noticed that the officer was holding a recording device down at his side. She asked to speak to her mother and father. An officer said that would happen after she spoke with detectives. She was asked if she'd been sexually assaulted, and Denise said, "No." She kept asking to speak to her parents. She says she knew something wasn't right.

[news clip comes in]

News Reporter 1: A strange story involving a Vallejo woman...

News Reporter 2: 29-year-old Denise Huskins turned up this morning at her mother's house in Huntington Beach after claiming she was kidnapped. Huskins' boyfriend, 30-year-old Aaron Quinn told police Huskins was forcibly kidnapped from his home on Mare Island early Monday morning.

News Reporter 3: Attorneys for Aaron Quinn maintain that he is a victim, not the perpetrator of a hoax in the so-called "kidnap for ransom" of his girlfriend Denise Huskins. Quinn is the one who called police Monday, claiming Huskins was taken in the middle of the night from his home.

[news clip fades out]

[music comes in]

Phoebe: The Vallejo Police issued a statement announcing that Denise had been located and read it out loud at a press conference that afternoon. Aaron, who was still in Vallejo, watched it on the news at his lawyer's office. The statement said, quote, "From an investigative standpoint, nothing has changed."

Aaron Quinn: Which I could tell that we were still suspects because everything should have changed to know Denise is alive.

I eventually go back to the station with my attorney ... and this around 7:00 PM that night. And Detective Mustard tells me, "We're going to offer you a proffer agreement immunity to say this thing was all made up.

Phoebe: A proffer agreement invites someone to share everything they know about a crime with assurance that what they say won't be used against. Denise was also offered a proffer agreement — told she could have immunity if she agreed to tell prosecutors what she knew about the kidnapping. [music fades out] Aaron and Denise were both offered the same deal.

Aaron: Either I take it, or Denise takes it. Not both of us. [music comes in]

Denise Huskins: And whoever takes it first will get it. And my response is, "Immunity from what?"

Aaron: So they're pretty much trying to pin us against each other.

Phoebe: Denise was in Huntington Beach now with her aunt and her cousin. Her cousin was an attorney, and he'd spoken on the telephone with Detective Matt Mustard of the Vallejo Police Department— that's how she learned about the proffer agreement. Her cousin also told her that the FBI was sending a plane to John Wayne Airport to transport her back home to Vallejo.

Denise's family hired a criminal defense attorney, a man named Doug Rappaport. Doug Rappaport told Denise not to take the FBI plane. He said he didn't want her to get on that plane for, quote, "The same reason. I wouldn't advise you to get in the mouth of a great white shark." Denise arranged to fly on a commercial flight to San Francisco at 8:30 PM.

The Vallejo Police Department issued a press release that read: "Given the facts that have been presented thus far, this appears to be an orchestrated event and not a kidnapping."

Aaron: My brother calls, and he saw that the police were going to a press conference. And when I watched press conference ... I wasn't surprised by it; I was shocked by how angry they were.

Phoebe: Here's Vallejo Police Department spokesperson, Lieutenant Kenny Park.

[archival clip comes in]

Lieutenant Kenny Park: Today, I'd like to go down kind of a laundry list of the facts in this case. [camera shutter sounds heard in the background] So, it's confirmed that Mr. Aaron Quinn and Ms. Denise Huskins are in a dating relationship. And from this point forward, I will not refer to them as a victim or a witness. Mr. Quinn was the first to report that his girlfriend, Ms. Huskins, was forcibly taken from his home in the early morning hours of Sunday by unknown strangers. And at some point, they made a ransom demand. We also know that the statement that Mr. Quinn provided was such an incredible story, we initially had a hard time believing it. And upon further investigation, we were not able to substantiate any of the things that he was saying. I can tell you in the grand scheme of things, Mr. Quinn and Ms. Huskins has plundered valuable resources away from our community. And has taking the focus away from the true victims of our profession while instilling fear amongst our community members. So, if anything, it is Mr. Quinn and Ms. Huskins that owes this community and apology.

[to Lt. Park]

Press Reporter: Is there any evidence that makes you know conclusively that this was a fake? And did something come out that made it without argument that this was all a hoax?

Lieutenant Kenny Park. Well, I can tell you that our investigation has concluded that none of the claims has been substantiated. And I could go one step further to say this: that this was not a random act. And that the members of our community are safe, and that they have nothing to fear. [music comes in]

Phoebe: A reporter asked if criminal charges would be filed against Denise Huskins and Aaron Quinn, to which Lieutenant Park replied, "That's a very good question."

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

Denise: I arrived in San Francisco right around the time that this press conference is airing. And by the time I get to my defense attorney's office, one of the first things he says to me is, "Look, the Vallejo Police just threw you under the bus. They held a press conference saying that this was all a hoax." And I'm just sitting there in ... shock.

[to Denise]

Phoebe: You had just been released a few hours earlier.

Denise: Yeah, I mean ... twelve? Less than twelve hours before that. Yeah. And it just was going from one nightmare to the next. And it just didn't make sense to me that the police would go after me so aggressively. And I'm playing back everything that happened and the evidence that happened. And we— I'm even considering, like, *Did I have a psychotic break?* And then I'm thinking about everything that was said to me in

captivity and all the different threats. And, you know, “If you say something to the police, we’ll know.” And the military style tactics that were used, and their complete arrogance that they wouldn’t get caught. So, then I’m wondering too, like, *How deep does this go? Is one of them involved in the police?* And so, I’m thinking of all the different possibilities of why this could happen ‘cause it just made no sense. And even my defense attorneys, like, you know, “I have decades of experience and I’ve never seen a police department go out this aggressively ... so soon”.

[as narrator]

Aaron: Denise’s defense attorney asked her to tell him every single thing that the police could potentially learn about her past and try to use against her. She answered questions for hours.

Denise: My defense attorney listened to me, and he said, “I’m going to represent you and we’ll fight this.” And “You don’t have to speak to the police, but if you do, you absolutely do have to tell them about the assaults and about them being in the military.” And I mean, I was sick ... just ill trying to make that decision thinking, *If I choose to do this, am I going to be putting a gun to one of my family member’s head ... and killing them?* I mean, so I just felt internally like being ripped apart. And my defense attorney tells me, which helped me make that choice, he’s like, “Look, the whole world is watching you right now. And that’s what people like this do. They want to have power and control over you for the rest of your lives, and you can’t give that to them anymore. Ultimately, it’s your decision. But the only way we have a chance of catching them is if you talk to the police.” And so, I agree, in the middle of the night at, I don’t know, 2 ... 3:00 AM. And he says, “Okay.” And he’s just starts working to try to get in contact with someone from Vallejo. And I could hear Doug saying, “Look, we need to get her to a hospital for a SART exam. That’s the first step we need ... ‘cause you know that the best time to collect evidence was within 48 hours. And the longer we wait, the less likely we’re going to get this evidence. So that’s what we need to do.” And—

[to Denise]

Phoebe: This would be for a rape exam of a sexual [Denise affirms] assault exam.
[crosstalk]

Denise: [crosstalk] Right. Yeah. In short, it’s SART. But it’s a rape exam.

And that officer on the phone goes, “Well, how do we know that she was raped? She won’t even talk to us.” And my defense is saying, “Because I’m representing her, and I’m speaking on her behalf. And I’m telling you that she’s gone through a horrible ordeal. She was threatened. We need to do this.”

And his response is, “Look, come to the station tomorrow. We’ll talk to her, and then we’ll see if it’s worth setting up the exam. So, I go in, and I talk to them for six or so hours, I give them my clothes... I tell them everything that happened. I tell them why I initially denied the assaults to the Huntington Beach Police ... because of those threats that were held against me.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Denise remembers that Detective Matt Mustard asked her about her drug and alcohol use and about her mental health. He asked her, “Did you ever think about fighting back or escaping?” He said to her, “Your dad told us you’re a marathon runner. He said you’re really tough.” She also remembers that Detective Mustard asked her if she’d ever been in the trunk of a car before, even, quote, “Just messing around.” She says he commented repeatedly on how calm she was.

Denise: And eventually they say, “Okay, we’ll set up the SART exam.” And... the two nurses were really nice and are respectful as they can be. But I had this female FBI agent sitting in the corner who I haven’t really talked to, I have another officer outside. I’m getting stripped naked. They’re taking pictures of me, including bruising on my back from where he dropped me. And I’m just thinking this whole time, like, *Is my body going to betray me? I didn’t fight him off. And so, because of that, are they even going to believe me?* [music comes in]

Phoebe: As early as March 26th, one day after the kidnapper had released Denise, reporters began to compare her to the fictional character in the 2012 crime novel by Gillian Flynn. The movie version was released in 2014 with Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike. In *Gone Girl*, a man is the primary suspect in the disappearance of his wife. It then comes out that the wife staged her own disappearance and made her husband look guilty in order to get back at him for cheating on her. It wasn’t just a popular narrative in the press. At one point, an FBI agent asked Denise’s lawyer, “Have you ever watched the movie gone girl? It’ll explain a lot.”

Aaron: Their conclusions were based off of fictional stories. They want to say is our case was too strange to be believed. I think it’s unbelievable that they’re basing thing up a movie ... a novel. That’s shocking to me.

Phoebe: People began saying horrible things about Denise and Aaron online. Denise received death threats. [music fades out]

One person wrote, “I wonder how many women were truly victimized while resources were being used to find a liar.” People said Denise wanted her fifteen minutes of fame. Even people Denise thought were her friends were sharing stories on Facebook with headlines like, “Real life ‘Gone Girl’ allegedly stayed her own insane fake kidnapping.”

There was someone insisting that Denise and Aaron were telling the truth. They were sending emails to the San Francisco Chronicle, taking responsibility for the kidnapping.

Aaron: The kidnappers actually sent emails after the police press conference calling it hoax. And they sent four, I think, five emails, trying to clear our names, and describing how they did the crime in great detail.

Phoebe: The emails contain details that had not been made public. And the sender emphasized that Denise and Aaron were victims and that this was not a hoax. Denise and Aaron and their attorneys thought the presence of details that no one else knew would be persuasive to the police.

Denise: And in fact, they use this as another joke. I mean, people rolled their eyes and, “Oh, ha-ha, the kidnappers coming to their defense”, and dismissed it as if we wrote it, including law enforcement. They even, I think accused my attorney at one point of maybe helping me write something. And that was pre-scheduled emails. And so, it didn't matter what happened, you know, it was decided. There was no escape.

[to Denise and Aaron]

Phoebe: All this time, the two of you were still— hadn't been reunited yet... because you were both now suspects in a crime. And your lawyers are saying you've got to be really careful. Tell me a little bit about that. Not being able to be reunited with each other right away. And what that was like when you eventually were.

Aaron: Our lawyers are telling us that if we get charged, we might not be able to talk for years. All I want to do is just hear her voice. [pauses] It was at least three days 'til we actually got to see each other...

Denise: Almost a full week after the kidnapping is when we first were reunited.

Aaron: And during that time, I was afraid that maybe Denise was blaming me because I was punishing myself... not just the kidnapping, but how I treated her before. And I thought she maybe just wanted to stay away from me and wipe the slate clean. But she did want to see me. And we were able to meet up at a hotel. And we just ... I mean, we just collapsed in each other's arms. [music comes in] And um... just sobbed... and fell down on the bed and just held each other for hours.

Denise: It just felt like I could really let go. Kind of like it re-energized me, and I felt like us being together made us both stronger. I mean, from that point on, especially the next couple of months, we did not leave each other's side. And so, there was a big sense of relief knowing that I wasn't just going to be by myself, and I was going to have him by my side. [music fades out]

There was no escaping it. My face, my name was “Gone Girl”. And Aaron too. We were hoaxsters, liars. And I was going to start a new job at Kaiser ‘cause a residency was ending and that didn't follow through. And Aaron was— they were trying to fire him. And there was even a couple of friends that thought the police were being honest about it being a hoax. And you know— so every— you could hardly trust anyone or anything. We just had to kind of hide within ourselves. And there was a very small group, I mean, our families for sure were huge rocks and support, and our lifelong friends who stood by us and believed in us. But anything beyond that, you didn't know ... or *who* knew what, or what they believed. And so, it just felt—everything felt like a threat. The kidnappers are still out there. The police are attacking us. Not just the police, but the FBI. We're commuting to Northern and Southern California between our families and friends ‘cause we can't return to that house. I mean, we were just completely lost in those few months.

Aaron: This entire time we're trying to get the police actually investigate because we knew that there was dangerous individuals out there. And despite what they're saying ... that their emails ... are most likely going to attack again.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: In June of 2015, a little more than two months after Denise and Aaron were attacked, someone broke into a house in the town of Dublin, California, about a forty-minute drive from Vallejo. A man in a mask stood over the bed of a couple in their sixties in the middle of the night. He tried to tie their hands with zip ties, but the husband began to fight, and the wife ran into the bathroom and called 9-1-1. The intruder ran away leaving a cell phone behind. That cell phone was traced to a woman who said the phone belonged to her son, Matthew Mueller. She told police he was staying at their family vacation house in South Lake Tahoe. The Alameda County Sheriff's Office assembled a team to search the house.

Speaker 1: I got a phone call from my sergeant of investigation saying that they were going to do a search warrant in South Lake Tahoe regarding the home invasion. And if I wanted to go, I needed to pack my bag and meet them at the station.

Phoebe: This is Sergeant Misty Carausu. In 2015, she was brand new to the Investigations Unit of the Alameda County Sheriff's Office. This was her first case with the unit. She says they arrived to the South Lake Tahoe home, broke down the door and found Matthew Mueller inside.

They took him into custody.

Misty Carausu says the windows were covered with cardboard. There was garbage everywhere.

Sergeant Misty Carausu: It looked like he had already committed crimes and just took the evidence of those crimes... He just threw them in boxes. So, I started going through, and there were so many things in plain view, like license plates, a key maker, laptop, cell phones and other items that were in plain view. And I legally was able to collect those as evidence as well.

Phoebe: There was a white Mustang parked near the house, which they determined was a stolen vehicle. When Misty opened the trunk, she found duct tape and zip ties, Nerf guns that had been painted black and had laser pointers attached to them with tape and a blow-up doll.

Sergeant Misty Carausu: And he was dressed in black. I say “he” because it was a male blow-up doll. And there was a wire wrapped around his— really thick wire to make it look like he was either going to be propped to [indistinguishable], propped to sit.

Phoebe: In the trunk of the car, Misty also found a pair of swim goggles with black duct tape covering the eyes. And a strand of long blonde hair. [music comes in]

Sergeant Misty Carausu: And I knew in my heart that somebody else was a victim here, and we needed to find out what happened. So, I collected all of the evidence, which was a lot of— it was a lot of evidence. We shoved it in all of our unmarked vehicle and drove it back to Dublin. I talked to the commander and told him that we needed to take the vehicle— go back to Lake Tahoe and take the vehicle as one complete piece of evidence instead of just taking everything else that was inside of it. So, they ultimately ended up going back up there and taking the vehicle. And then when I got back to the station, it was just going through tiny little bits of everything.

Phoebe: The white Mustang had been stolen from a Touro University student on Mare Island where Aaron Quinn lived. When Misty spoke with a student, he told her about a man who had been going around Mare Island looking into people's windows, sometimes standing on a retractable ladder. The students said Mare Island residents frequently called the Vallejo police about it, but no arrests had been made. He also told Misty that his car had been stolen very close to the time when a woman named Denise Huskins had been kidnapped. And that the Vallejo police had dismissed it as a Gone Girl hoax.

Sergeant Misty Carausu: I went online, I googled “Gone Girl Vallejo kidnapping.” I saw Denise's video, the news conferences with her lawyers and she had blonde hair. It all made sense to me.

Phoebe: She called the Vallejo Police Department and said she had a person of interest that they might want to look at in connection with the kidnapping of Denise Huskins. [music comes in] She says that it took a number of phone calls before someone would speak to her. And then, she was told that they weren't investigating the

case any further. It was with the FBI. So, Misty called the FBI. She said she thought they should look into Matthew Mueller. And they came and took all of the evidence that had been collected from the white Mustang and the house in South Lake Tahoe, which included Aaron Quinn's laptop. It had been stolen from his house on the night of the home invasion.

Denise: And then everything else— the white Mustang also had in the GPS, the cross streets where I was dropped off, where I was released. And it was the same layout of the home that I had described. And so, there was just overwhelming amounts of evidence that linked him to our case.

[to Denise]

Phoebe: Who was Matthew Mueller? Who was this guy?

Denise: I mean, we found out about him in news reports. Apparently, he was a Harvard educated attorney. He was honest about a lot of what he told me. He was in the military. He was in the Marines. He at one point was married and gotten a divorce, and it seemed like there was a lot of things in his life that were falling apart leading up to this point. He had been linked to some prior break-ins about eight or so years before our case. He had been an attorney—immigration attorney—but apparently, he was disbarred.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: In 2011, his employer accused him of stealing records from the office computer network at night, sleeping in a sleeping bag in the building to do it, and then using a computer program to try to hide what he'd done. Other employers had significant problems with his failure to represent his clients. [music comes in] The state bar got involved and he was disbarred in 2015. But his credentials were a major component of how the press talked about him. He's very often referred to as a Harvard educated lawyer.

[news clip comes in]

Reporter 4: Now, the couple's attorneys say they plan to continue to rebuild their lives and move forward. They would like an apology from the Vallejo Police Department, but so far, Vallejo Police aren't saying anything. They have not provided a comment.

[clip ends] [music fades out]

Phoebe: At this point, Denise and Aaron began to learn things they hadn't been told before. They learned that three phone calls were made from the kidnapper to Aaron's phone around 8:30 PM on March 23rd. The first night Denise was being held captive, the

police had Aaron's phone and had told Aaron that there had been no communication from the kidnappers. They learned that the phone company was cooperating and could trace those calls to within 200 square meters of the caller's location in South Lake Tahoe. So had police wanted to trace the calls and search the area, they could have done so the first time. Denise and Aaron learned that the missed calls have been made with a prepaid track phone that had been bought at Target. A surveillance video from target shows a man buying the phone, wearing a dark polo shirt and dark shorts. The police apparently thought it was Aaron in the video and had even collected black basketball shorts and a black shirt from Aaron's home during their investigation. At one point, the police and FBI had told Aaron's attorney that they had video proof that Aaron and Denise had orchestrated the whole thing.

Aaron and Denise also learned that the FBI had searched a storage unit that had been rented under Matthew Mueller's name and found five drones, remote controls, and video cameras. They'd found a video that had been filmed with a drone through the window of Aaron's house earlier in the evening on the night of the home invasion.

But there are a lot of things they still don't know. They still don't know why they were targeted, or more specifically, why Aaron and his ex-fiancé were targeted. They've tried to get the department of justice and FBI to look into it. And they don't know what happened to the other people who were with Matthew Mueller when he broke into the house. Investigators have told them that Matthew Mueller acted alone pointing to the blow-up doll and audio recordings that Mueller made to make it seem like multiple people were present in the house. In an interview from jail, Mueller told the reporter he acted alone. But Denise and Aaron say they know what they saw and heard. As Denise put, "It feels like every step of the way, they're trying to gaslight us into changing our recollection of events to fit the narrative they've created."

In September of 2015, Matthew Mueller pled no contest to four counts of battery robbery and assault for the Dublin home invasion, the case where Misty Carausu had been assigned to collect evidence. He was sentenced to ten years in prison. And then in September of 2016, he pled guilty to federal kidnapping charges in Denise's case. He had entered into an agreement with the prosecution. They would seek no more than a maximum of forty years in prison in exchange for his guilty plea. At the sentencing hearing, the prosecution asked for the maximum forty years, telling the judge that, quote, "Public safety requires that he be imprisoned until he's old and weak." Matthew Mueller's defense attorney asked for thirty years. He asked the judge take into consideration Mueller's mental health referring to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. He described Mueller's condition as, quote, "truly debilitating."

Denise: And at that hearing, we were able to speak and give our victim impact statements. And that was the first time we spoke publicly. And we had the whole

courtroom full of mostly our friends and family supporting us. And I know for myself, I wanted to make sure I looked him in the eye and told him how this impacted me in my life. And especially in those days of captivity, I was always blindfolded in front of him. And he was doing what he wanted with my body and had complete control over my life. And that whole time, I just kind of viewed him as this blurred figure, this like faceless ghost. And now, there was a name and a face. And I looked him in the eye, and he looked back at me, and I said what I needed to say. And it was empowering. And it gave a sense of closure.

Phoebe: The judge sentenced Matthew Mueller to forty years. And the judge addressed Denise and Aaron, “You're going down a path of healing. The strongest thing you have is each other.” [music comes in]

January of 2018, the state of California brought six more charges against Matthew Mueller for crimes committed against Aaron and Denise: kidnapping, two counts of rape robbery, burglary, and false imprisonment. He hasn't yet gone to trial on those charges. There have been delays — Mueller at times wanting to represent himself, at times working with attorneys, firing them, again representing himself. In November of 2020, a judge ordered him to be moved to a secure mental health facility. And it was reported that he had been found incompetent to stand trial. We contacted the Solano County District Attorney's Office for an update but haven't heard.

[to Denise and Aaron]

When did you decide to sue Vallejo?

Denise: I think we filed it in September 2015. We had spoken to a civil attorney actually maybe a month before we found out that Mueller was caught. [music fades out] Didn't seem like it was going anywhere 'cause it's really hard to fight the police. But now that Mueller was caught and it was— there's actual evidence to show— actual evidence now *made public* to show that we were actually a part of this horrific crime, we had more to go on as far as being able to continue with a suit.

Aaron: We spent about \$140,000 on criminal defense attorneys, and we weren't even charged. Not many families have that type of resources, and it was, you know.... we're dipping into our parents' retirement funds. And I was fortunately able to sell my home. But taking away a lot of money that many people can't do. And our hope too with the lawsuit is that maybe they'll show some level of accountability.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: The city of Vallejo agreed to pay Aaron and Denise \$2.5 million. But as far as they know, none of the Vallejo Police Department officers were reprimanded. Detective Matt Mustard was named Officer of the Year for 2015.

Last year, a former Vallejo Police Department, Captain John Whitney sued the city and the department for wrongful termination. In his lawsuit, he alleges that he was fired after speaking up against police misconduct. John Whitney describes an incident where shortly before the press conference, in which Lieutenant Kenny Park said Denise and Aaron owed the community an apology, he heard the department chief Andrew Bidou tell Lieutenant Park to, quote, "Burn that bitch." He alleges that he was instructed to delete text messages from his phone that referenced Denise and Aaron's case. And he described a culture within the department where some officers would bend the tips of their star-shaped badges to signify that they'd killed someone while on duty. We reached out to the Vallejo Police Department for comment but haven't heard back.
[music comes in]

[to Denise and Aaron]

Tell me about life now. You'd only been in a relationship for like seven months when this whole thing happened. That's not very long to have been in relation. Then this happened. Tell me about that. And you're still together.

Aaron: Yeah. We're fortunate to move away from the city of Vallejo into the Santa Cruz area. And we chose this area because it's close to the ocean and close to the Redwoods, and we knew nature was going to be a big part of our recovery. And it has been. It's been our safe little bubble. We got married in 2018. We have a daughter who was born on March 25th, 2020, which was exactly five years to date of Denise's release. She provides us a lot of joy, and we do what regular parents do — and watch her play and see the world through her eyes and the excitement that she sees on the tiniest thing helps us move forward. You know, just her seeing a bird in the sky, you realize how amazing birds are, flowers blooming. And we've been going to therapy as individuals and as couples and helped us process through this. And we're truly blessed to have family and friends that support us throughout this.

Denise: And a lot of people have asked, "How did you and Aaron stay together? That would break up a lot of couples." And I think ... I think it's a testament to what our connection really was. I mean, we never blamed each other. We never attacked each other. It's been a long road of healing and it's been kind of messy. But in time it has gotten easier. And we are really fortunate to be in a much better place. We have each other. We have our families. We have our sweet little girl. We have our jobs, and we're still helping people, and we're treating patients. And now we get to reclaim our trauma

and share our story. And so, we're just really happy that we get the opportunity to do that.

Phoebe: Today, Denise is certified as a victims advocate. And she and Aaron have written a book. It's called *Victim F: From Crime Victims to Suspects to Survivors*. They write, "To all the many victims and survivors out there, we have been fueled and inspired by all of your strength and bravery. This is our humble attempt to pay it forward."

[to Denise and Aaron]

Police said that both of you didn't act like victims ... or you weren't good enough victims — didn't do what victims are supposed to do. What do you think about that, and what do you think about what's expected of victims?

Denise: Well, to go back to the *Gone Girl* thing, I hadn't read the book or seen the movie before this whole thing. And supposedly I was replicating something I didn't know anything about. But when I did watch the movie, I mean, before that I would kind of go back and forth: *I should've done this. I should've fought back, so then I'd have bruises, so I'd have an internal injury so they would believe me*. And I just kept battling with myself about it. Until I watched that movie, I realized it didn't matter what I did or said if I had more gruesome injuries ... because she hit herself in the face with a hammer. She was very dramatic when she's released, and I was told I was too calm. So it was clear that they had decided, before I was even released that they didn't believe me. And so, it didn't matter how I acted. They were going to make that fit their beliefs and their narratives.

Aaron: And on my part, some of the things they were telling my brother was I knew too many details, which I don't even know what that means. I'm trying to give him as much information as possible to help them. So, is too many details seven? Eight? Nine? It's an arbitrary cut-off. I think people don't know how they're going to react until they're in the experience. And police are trained that every victim acts differently. The tunnel vision, the confirmation bias is a thing that people need to realize that they're maybe falling into those traps of how someone should act. [music comes in] And you don't know everyone's story. I don't believe empathy is putting yourself in someone else's shoes because that's impossible. I think empathy is knowing that you'll never be in someone else's shoes, but you try anyways.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Criminal is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Susanna Roberson is our producer. Engineering by Russ Henry. Audio mix

by Johnny Vince Evans, Michael Raphael, and Rob Byers, of Final Final V2. Special thanks to Lily Clark.

Julienne Alexander creates original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com.

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Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

END OF EPISODE.